Scrutiny by the Censor

On the decision of the Minister of Culture to Establish Offices for Censorship of Artistic Works in Seven Governorates
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Publisher:
Association o Freedom of Thought and Expression
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Cover Design: Amal Hamed
Internal Design: Amal Hamed
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Summary

In January 2018, Dr. Inas Abdel-Dayem, in a limited ministerial reshuffle, assumed the duties of her new position as Minister of Culture.

The ministerial reshuffle coincided with a new onslaught led by media and journalists on creative artists because of addressing performance by state apparatus. The attack extended to the performance of the Ministry of Culture and the Censorship of Artistic Works for its inability to control what emerges on the cultural scene.

The attack came after Sisi demanded that intellectuals and media personnel deal with any attempt to abuse the armed forces and considered it “high treason.”

In response to the attack, the Minister of Culture criticized the works that provoked the crisis and issued a decision to establish branches for the censorship authority the cultural palaces of seven governorates “in implementation of the principle of decentralization”.

More than three months after the decision was issued, the Ministry of Culture did not provide any detailed information on the mandates or mechanisms of work of the new branches.

The decision comes in an attempt by the Ministry of Culture and the censorship authority to extend “inspection” over the governorates of Egypt, to avoid some of the mistakes that caused the provocation of the regime and its supporters, and in an attempt to prove its effectiveness and ability to control what emerges to the public from the cultural landscape.

Through this decision, the Ministry of Culture misuses cultural palaces in censorship works, instead of developing them and strengthening their role in the dissemination of popular culture in Egypt.
Dr. Inas Abdel-Dayem, Minister of Culture, issued a decree to establish offices for the Central Authority for the Censorship of Works of Art in seven governorates. In his program\(^1\) on Sada El Balad channel, Ahmed Moussa announced, on 11 March 2018, the establishment of new censorship offices to be hosted in the cultural palaces of Giza, 6th of October, South Sinai, Assiut, Aswan, Luxor, Marsa Matrouh, and the Red Sea.

The following day the official website of the Ministry of Culture\(^2\) and the ministry’s official page on Facebook published that the ministry will start the implementation of the decision in early 2018, for the purpose of facilitating and simplifying procedures for artists and citizens, as well as implementation of the principle of “decentralization.”

Since the decision was issued last March, the ministry has not yet announced any details or mechanisms for the implementation of the decision, and only announced the governorates where the offices will be set up, thereby extending the censorship of works of art to cover nine governorates, including the offices of Cairo and Alexandria.

Through this paper, AFTE seeks to clarify the circumstances surrounding the decision, especially since the timing of its issuance was very sensitive, as it came after a new attack on creative artists. The paper also tries to discuss the context that led to the decision and to what extent it expresses a tighter control over creative works with the aim of expanding state’s control over works beyond central cities.

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2. Minister of culture issues a decree for the establishment of censorship offices in 7 governorates, official website of the ministry of culture, published on 12 March 2018, last visit in March 2018. [https://goo.gl/M1ZCXq](https://goo.gl/M1ZCXq)
The decision to establish new censorship offices was preceded by a new attack on creativity and creative artists in Egypt. Within two weeks, journalists, journalists and intellectuals affiliated with the current authority attacked the play “Sulaiman Khater”, the “Khair Neswan Al-Ard” book of poetry bureau and those responsible for the two works, claiming they constituted an insult to the army and a support of terrorism. It also filed complaints against creative artists, leading to the imprisonment of members of the cast of the “Suleiman Khater” play, confiscation of the poetry book and imprisonment of its author, in addition to the arrest and pursuit of the makers of the film “Negative 1095 days,” the imprisonment of the dancer “Gawhara” for accusations of inciting debauchery. The censorship authority also banned the theater performance “Before the Revolution”.

This wave of attack coincided with Sisi’s speech during the opening of the city of Alamein, on the first of March 2018, in which he announced that an insult to the army and the police is an insult to all Egyptians, and is equivalent at the time of “war” to high treason. He called on the state media, cultural and educational authorities to reconsider their performance and to address, with no need for prior permission, attempts of insult to the military and police institutions.

The crisis of the “Sulaiman Khater” play, which was sparked by an article by journalist Ayman Badra in the sports news newspaper on February 27, 2018, represented the first challenge for the new minister, Inas Abdel Dayem, at the time as regards freedom of creativity, when the “Badra” article, instigating against the makers of the play, shown on the Hunting Club Theater, triggered a press and media campaign against them. This led to the filing of complaints against them and their imprisonment pending investigation for charges of insulting the military establishment.

In his article titled “Crime against the Army in the Hunting Club,” Badra described the play as a sabotage of the minds of Egyptian youth during wartime, and that it was a crime aiming to undermine the status of the army, in view of its grave insults and sarcasm towards sacrifices of military men, support of terrorism and fragmentation of national ties. He demanded that the makers of the play be held accountable as well as those who permitted the show. He added, “I do not think that the new sports law and its regulations and any club regulations that give freedom to general assemblies would allow tampering with state destiny and insulting its army.”

The day following the publication of the article, presenter Ahmed Moussa used the full time of his program to attack artists whose works criticized any state institution, foremost the military and the police. He also strongly criticized the Ministry of Culture as well as state institutions for failing to take action against “those who crossed the line”.

3. Best women in the world
The episode included an inflammatory speech against actors in the “Sulaiman Khater” play, especially its director Ahmad Al-Garhi, and against the author of “Khair Neswan Al-Ard”, writer and poet Galal Al-Beheiri.

The “Khair Neswan Al-Ard” collection of poems, which was scheduled to be presented at Cairo International Book Fair, also triggered the anger of the pro-regime media as soon as its release was announced. The attack was based on the title, which was considered a religious and political mockery, since it distorts a sacred religious text with the aim of ridiculing soldiers of the armed forces, which Moussa described in the same episode as “a shame and disgrace”. He added that he must die first before allowing this “nonsense” to spread in Egypt.

Following this episode, Dad publishing house broke its contract with El Beheiri, disowned the poem collection and in a press statement announced its “full solidarity with the Egyptian battle for development under the leadership of President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi”, adding “As soon as we realized what the poet had done we broke the contract and ended all dealings with him, and that no voice is louder than that of the battle lead by our heroes in Sinai.” Complaints were also filed by several officials, media personnel and lawyers against the makers of the works, which created the crisis.

Lawyer Tariq Mahmoud filed a complaint against writer and poet Galal al-Beheiri, accusing him of insulting the Egyptian armed forces, insulting religion and distorting the image of the head of state. Lawyer Samir Sabri also filed three complaints with the Public Prosecutor, the High State Security Prosecution and the Military Prosecutor General against Rami Essam for his recent release of the song “Balha”, the author of “Khair Neswan Al-Ard”, and the director and author of “Soliman Khater” in view of the play’s ridicule of the sacrifices of the armed forces. As a result of those complaints, which were referred to military judiciary, trials are ongoing for Galal al-Behiri, Ahmad al-Garhi, director of the play, Walid Atef, its author, and those who helped them bring military uniforms to the show. The State Security Prosecutor ordered the arrest of film editor Tariq Ziada for 15 days pending investigations for charges of spread of false news in a film titled “Negative 1095 days” 8, and ordered the arrest of Salma Aladdin, the film’s producer, and a number of its crew members.

With regard to the crisis of the dancer “Gawhara”9, the Public Prosecution had released her on a 5,000 pounds bail pending investigations in a case where she is accused of inciting obscenity and immorality, arousing instincts through sexual insinuations and

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7. Director and author of a theater play detained on remand for charges of “insulting the army”, BBC Arabic, published March 6, 2018, last visit May 2018. https://goo.gl/9FZwpY
8. Tarek Samir, lawyer for the production of the film “Negative 1095 days”: We are still studying Salma›s extradition to the prosecution, Masrawy, published on March 1, 2018, last visit in May 2018. https://goo.gl/frX9uP
working without a license. The tourism police had filed a report against the Russian dancer, Ekaterina Andreeva, after the spread of a video of her dancing on “Facebook”. Investigations said that, in that video, the dancer wore a semi-naked costume - without shorts underneath - not conforming with specifications, showing the charms of her body, as well as using her hand to point to sensitive parts of her body, to arouse the instincts of the youth.

This attack put the Ministry of Culture in a crisis with the regime, where the performance of the Ministry and the censorship authority was described as slack, for not being aware enough of what is produced on the cultural scene to be able to monitor it, and then grant or with draw approval, as well as take the necessary measures against it before it goes out to public display. It also put the ministry in a crisis with creative artists in view of its failure to exercise its role in supporting culture and intellectuals, and to provide a strong base on which to build an Egyptian cultural movement, allowing the creation of a fertile and inspiring climate for artists to be creative and display their creative works.

**Echo of the attack within the Ministry of Culture**

Minister of Culture Inas Abdel Dayem, in a telephone intervention\(^\text{10}\) with Ahmed Moussa during his program “Ala Masouleiti” said that the “Sulaiman Khater” play did not get approval from the censorship authority whether its presentation at the Hunting Club theater, or in its first show in the 2016 amateur festival in Alexandria. She also announced the ministry took prompt steps through reports made by the director of inspection and censorship against the play case and those who allowed it to be shown. Despite the assurances of the director that he would not dare mock the sacrifices of the army, Abdel-Dayem announced her refusal of the show and took what she considered ‘necessary measures’.

One month before the wave of the new attack against artists, Inas Abdel Dayem\(^\text{11}\), in a limited cabinet reshuffle of four portfolios, assumed her new post as minister of culture, replacing the Helmi El Namnam. The cabinet reshuffle came amid criticism of failure and laxity faced by the Ministry of Culture. Despite the great welcome of a first time appointment of a woman as minister of culture and the hopes held by intellectuals towards that appointment, especially in view of her role as one of the leaders of the sit-ins in 2013 against what was called the “brotherhoodism of culture,” Abdel-Dayem’s statements during the crisis came to reveal the inclination of the ministry towards

\(^{10}\) Ahmed Moussa, “Ala Massouleity” episode, YouTube, published on 28 February 2018, the date of the last visit in May 2018. https://goo.gl/zc92kt

\(^{11}\) Nehal Nasser, Inas Abdel-Dayem Minister of Culture .. First Lady in this position, Filfann, published on 14 January 2018, the date of the last visit in May 2018. https://goo.gl/5Ckh6s
increasing constraints on art and artists in Egypt, especially after her condemnation of the play and its sponsors, and her first decision taken in that crisis being further censorship control through the establishment of offices for the Central censorship authority in various governorates in Egypt.

It is noteworthy that the measures taken by the Ministry of Culture, represented by the minister, to file complaints against artists, came after the release of a statement by the Public Prosecutor, Nabil Sadek, who issued instructions to monitor and regulate media channels that disseminate lies and false news. The statement stressed that all legal and criminological measures will be taken towards the various media outlets and social media sites that intentionally broadcast false news, statements and rumors that could disturb public security, or instill fear in the hearts of members of society and the consequent harm to the public interest of the Egyptian state.

This move by the ministry of culture represents a very dangerous turning point, in which the ministry complied to pressures by state media, and took quick and confusing actions against artists and freedom of creativity through declarations and decisions, converting the role of the ministry into one of censorship chasing artists and reporting on those who do not perform within the boundaries set by the state, while abandoning its main mandates to support cultural activity, and help to create an enabling and stimulating environment for creativity that supports culture and intellectuals in Egypt.

What we know about the decree

One of the confused moves by the Ministry of Culture was issuing a decision to expand the number of censorship offices. The decision was taken in the midst of the crisis, and as a quick reaction in an attempt to prove the strong presence of the Ministry of Culture, with its new administration. One characteristic of this new administration is that it is in harmony with the regime and the president as well as the image that the current authority is trying to project of itself both locally and abroad.

One day before the announcement on the official website of the Ministry of Culture of the decision by Abdel-Dayem to establish censorship branches to control works of art in the governorates, presenter Ahmed Moussa, made an urgent announcement on his program, disclosing the decision and claiming it to be an “exclusive for the program” and claiming the decision to have been in response to what he discussed the previous week regarding the “Soliman Khater” play and the poem collection.

This decision is most likely meant to avoid the deficiencies in the inspection campaigns

12. Ibrahim Kassem and Samir Mohsen, the Attorney General orders the seizure of media outlets involved in broadcasting false news and rumors, Al Youm Al Sabeé, published on 28 February 2018, the last visit in May 2018. https://goo.gl/z9MVjt
13. Ahmed Moussa, Dr. Inas Abdel-Dayem, Minister of Culture issues a decision to establish branches for censorship of works of art, on YouTube, published on 11 March 2018, last visit May 2018. https://goo.gl/z9MVjt
carried out by the censorship authority. This means the periodic undertaking of inspection campaigns of places of public shows to ensure that they have the necessary licenses as well as permits for the public display. Thereby the Ministry of Culture is trying to avoid being criticized by supporters of the current authority because of works of art such as the Soliman Khater play.

According to this decree, the Ministry of Culture is using cultural palaces as offices for censorship of works of art, instead of developing them, opening closed ones and promoting their role in the dissemination and development of mass culture in the governorates of Egypt, as promised\(^\text{14}\) by the Minister of Culture after taking office, that the General Authority for Culture Palaces is one of the most important portfolios on her agenda, and that her plan as minister is to grant culture a space “outside walls”.

Since the issuance of the decree on the establishment of branches for the censorship authority in March 2018, the Ministry has not yet officially disclosed any details or measures for the implementation of the resolution, nor did the official gazette publish any information in that regard, until the time of writing of this paper. This policy of non-disclosure reflects the state policy regarding monopoly on information, which makes us unable of understanding the detailed consequences of this decree.

However, Al Youm Al Sabe’e newspaper, close to the current authority, after contacting relevant contacts within the Ministry of Culture, published\(^\text{15}\) a report, citing sources, on the terms of reference for those branches and their mechanism of work. According to the report, the censorship will have the jurisdiction to organize tapes of films, songs, plays, standing performers, records and audio tapes according to the law. The report added that the culture palaces in the seven governorates specified by the Minister, will allocate special offices to review works of art and that employees from the central censorship bureau in Cairo may be delegated to those governorates or staff working at the culture palaces may be chosen to work in the review of artistic works, by preparing them through training courses; also that the decision of the minister came to facilitate review of works of art in the governorates, instead of relying entirely on the central administration in Cairo.

In view of the context surrounding the decision of the Ministry of Culture, the current authority strives to create a wave of antagonism against any differing discourse. It calls upon slogans such as the “war on terror” and “time of war” to silence its opponents and to extend its control over works produced by individuals, groups or cultural institutions in any public space.

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How the decision contributes to the restriction of creativity

Finally, we cannot look upon the decision of the Minister of Culture and understand its consequences in isolation from a more general and comprehensive picture of an expanding system of censorship of works of art can be expanded, involving multiple control bodies and different jurisdictions that seek to control everything that differs from the mainstream. A cultural product in Egypt, since its development as an idea, through its development and then display to the public is constrained and controlled by several bodies, to which the recent decision is but an additional factor.

The role of the censorship authority extends beyond issuing permits for cinema productions or approval of scripts. The central administration for censorship of audiovisual works of art (censorship of artistic works) is the body authorized to license recording, copying, distribution, renting, selling, showing and publishing in accordance with law 430/1995 of the regulation of cinematographic tapes, magic lanterns, songs, plays, music records and cassette tapes, including permits for singers and dancers and anybody who performs any form of art. Also, no party can be organized in a public place without permission by that authority, irrespective of whether or not the performers are professionals. The process of censorship passes through two phases. The first concerns the inspection of artistic events and the permits of all show spaces, whether cinema, drama, or public occasions. The second phase concerns the release of permits for artistic works within a timeframe of maximum 3 months, either approving or rejecting the work as a whole or conditional approval upon some amendments.

In addition to the role of the censorship authority over works of art, the current authority, since its inception after June 30, 2013, has taken control of all media and cultural platforms by expanding the powers of some departments and authorities, or introducing new ones and enacting the necessary legislation and laws to impose control and oversight of everything that goes public, a role recently actively adopted by the drama committee affiliated to the Supreme Media Council.

Artistic work in Egypt is surrounded by different types of censorship, both in their mechanisms and authorities undertaking them. There is the direct state control, which is exercised by the security - police, military, army; judicial institutions; religious institutions - Al Azhar and the Church; trade unions – of actors and musicians; and Ministries and government institutions. There is also social control, which is the result of state censorship and its conservative discourse, among other factors. Citizens exercise such control and judgment driven by a sense of national responsibility, which is imposed upon them by the state in order to fight “forces of evil”. This restrictive climate generates self censorship among artists to avoid exposure to danger or taking risks.

This restrictive environment does not prohibit addressing political issues only, but everything that goes beyond the permitted acceptable norm. Art works that address state organs and their performance in any form, or subjects such as sex and religion
are enough to prohibit the work or lead to the imprisonment of its maker in many cases. There is a demarcation of new ill-defined boundaries of the moral code of the state, where the state takes a middle position, so to speak, so as to prevent addressing issues freely, in a pluralistic and diverse manner or conservatively in a manner that is incompatible with the official version of decency and religiosity.

Despite those established roots of censorship, the sole legal body responsible for it, the “censorship authority”, was unable to inspect everything that reached public display. Khalid Abdul Galil, head of censorship of works of art, said that he had only six inspectors, who are expected to cover 27 governorates throughout the Republic.

This inability of the inspection campaigns to oversee the entire cultural scene, including the monitor and control of all that reaches the public, always leaves a risky margin for individuals to work outside the framework of the state control bodies. Some cultural initiatives remote from the focus of the center, organize public performances without obtaining approval of the content presented, to avoid the bureaucracy and mentality of the oversight body. These spaces - virtual and material - that artists seek to create and maintain, are gradually being eroded, especially with attempts by the Ministry of Culture to prove its effectiveness and ability to control the cultural scene, by resorting to further restrictions through decisions such as expanding the number of its offices to control works of art. As a result these young cultural initiatives, which seek to exist and spread in the narrow spaces available, are constrained; the existence of free/amateur theater groups, which contribute to the pumping of new blood in the Egyptian cultural life, is threatened.

The Ministry of Culture therefore wishes to issue such decisions restrictive creative art in order to extend its control beyond the boundaries of the center, to monitor more closely and pre-empt criticism from supporters of the current authority to other works by exercising early censorship. These anti-creative trends appear to be a strategy followed by the Ministry of Culture, which is evident in statements by officials in the ministry. During the discussion by the parliamentary Human Rights Committee of the role of the Ministry of Culture in the application of human rights standards, the Minister of Culture said that art works and the decadence found in some productions on the art scene is unacceptable, but a large part of it is produced by the private sector, pointing out that the ministry is working through “its censorship departments” to address this decadence.

Despite allegations by the Ministry of Culture that the decision is in favor of freedom of creativity, and that the ministry seeks to apply the principle of decentralization to facilitate procedures for artists and citizens - which can be considered relatively true since it would allow writers and artists in the fields of cinema and art work to issue and collect their permits from these centers - yet the mandate of those offices is not limited to the procedural aspect of art production alone, but have a supervisory authority to

17. Mohamed Tarek, Minister of Culture: We will face «vulgarity» of works of art by censorship, Al Watan, published on 13 February 2018, last visit May 2018. https://goo.gl/yYs3RC
allow or refuse works of art.

The Ministry of Culture also submits that the increase in the number of offices is an implementation of decentralization and provides a service that benefits innovators in the various governorates. This is a misconception of the idea of decentralization, which is based on the allocation of spaces for cultural activity outside the focus of the center, not restricting it by censorship. In this context, Abdul Galil\textsuperscript{18} said that there are many provinces and coastal cities in Egypt, where concerts are held on a daily basis, and that the organizers have to travel to Cairo to finish the necessary permits; so this decision was made to facilitate things for them; and that the numerical deficit of inspectors makes them unable to cover all governorates, that is why this decision came in the “favor of censorship”, adding that they will choose inspectors from the people of each governorate, because they are most familiar with the local context and conditions of its population.

The danger of the decision does not only lie in the numerical increase of inspectors, allowing them to know and control the broader cultural scene throughout the Republic, but also in the content and mechanisms of exercising the control over works of art, which becomes subject to personal and subjective judgments, depending on the vision and social, religious, political and geographical orientation of the censor. What could be permitted in Cairo, may be rejected in another governorate, whether out of bullying or in view of its violation of his personal concept of censorship, which was evident in the occasional changing censorship decisions banning a work of art and then allowing it after change in the inspection committee, or vice versa.\textsuperscript{19}

\section*{Conclusion}

In conclusion, if we consider this decision in the context of the current authority since its ascent to power in June 2013, we will find that the state adopts a set of conservative policies that are hostile to any crossing of its boundaries. After the current authority has taken control over large production companies, using both legislation and capital, this authority is now clearly trying to control spaces of free creativity that young youth initiatives are trying to exploit, so as to ensure- after closing press, media and Internet outlets- full and comprehensive control over the rest of the cultural spaces in areas remote from the center. This increases the need for the cultural community to circumvent, reject and resist policies of the Ministry of Culture that are complementary to the state monopoly of public space, and its control of political and cultural and the media.

\textsuperscript{18} Ahmed El Shaarani, Details of the establishment of censorship offices in 7 governorates and the increases in the number of “inspectors”, Al Tahrir Al Ekhbary, published on 13 March 2018, last visited in May 2018. https://goo.gl/4ntwr

\textsuperscript{19} Mohamed Hameeda, Egyptian Minister of Culture allows the screening of the film «Karma», which was banned by censorship, BBC Arabic, published June 12, 2018, last visit June 2018. https://goo.gl/G67kWc